Sufi Answers to Questions on Ultimate Reality*

by

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In connection with the origins of Sufism, attitudes have changed very rapidly in the last decades. The change has not been unanimous; but there is an undeniably increasing tendency for opinions to shift away from the notion that Sufism has its roots in Hinduism or Buddhism or Neoplatonism or Christianity rather than in Islam, and towards agreement with the Sufis themselves in maintaining that Sufism is an integral part of Islam, or more precisely that it is and always has been "the heart of Islam." But Islam has stood the test of time; and to do so—or even, we might say, to survive—a way of worship must be capable of appealing to the wisest and deepest elements in the collectivity which practices it, capable of enlisting those souls which are most imbued with a sense of Ultimate Reality. For this it must have the dimension of mysticism; and if Sufism is not Islam's mystical dimension, what is? Without Sufism Islam would be a strange anomaly. It would not even be a religion in the fullest sense of the word. That is of course what many people liked to think in the past.

Let us quote in this connection a recent definition of religion which is rigorous enough not to omit any necessary element while being at the same time supple enough to enable us to include, in one and the same breath, such dissimilars as Judaism and Buddhism, or as Christianity and the religion of the Red Indians:

> For a religion to be considered as intrinsically orthodox—and extrinsic orthodoxy hangs upon particular formal elements which cannot apply literally outside their own perspective—it must rest upon a fully adequate doctrine of the Absolute; then it must extol and actualize a spirituality that is equal to this doctrine and thereby include sanctity within its ambit both as concept and reality; this means that it must be of Divine, and not philosophical, origin and thus be charged with a sacramental or theurgic presence manifesting itself particularly in miracles and—though this may surprise some—in sacred art. Particular formal elements such as apostolic personalities and sacred events are subordinate, as forms, to the above principial elements; they may therefore differ in significance and value from one

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> religion to another—for human diversity makes such fluctuation inevitable—without causing any contradiction as regards the essential criteria which concern both metaphysical truth and the power to save.[1]

The mutual inextricability of Islam and Sufism is here affirmed by an implication which cannot be gainsaid; for it is precisely Sufism which "actualizes a spirituality that is equal to the doctrine," that is, equal to the Islamic doctrine of the Absolute; and it is through Sufism that Islam is able to "include sanctity within its ambit both as concept and reality." Every Islamic region or country has, as its Patron Saint, a man who was head of a Sufi order, except for those few places presided over by an "apostolic personality" who lived before the term *Sufi* was used; and indeed, with the same exceptions, all the generally recognized Saints of Islam are known to have been Sufis.

The conclusion is the same if we approach the question from yet another angle—that of the Koran, which is the direct source of Islam. As early as 1922, a study of the Koran compelled Massignon to say: "Contrary to the Pharasaical opinion of many *fuqahāʾ,* an opinion which has been accepted for the last sixty years by many Arabists, I have had to admit, with Margoliouth, that the Koran contains real seeds of mysticism, seeds capable of an autonomous development without being impregnated from any foreign source."[2]

A much more explicit formulation in the same direction was made not long ago by Schuon. From the Sufi point of view, Massignon's "admission" is a marked understatement. Schuon does not understate, while at the same time he goes half-way to meet the residue of the resistance referred to by Massignon:

> One reason why Western people have difficulty in appreciating the Koran and have even many times questioned whether this book does contain the premises of a spiritual life lies in the fact that they look in a text for a meaning that is fully expressed and immediately intelligible, whereas Semites, and Eastern peoples in general, are lovers of verbal symbolism and read "in depth". . . . But even without taking into consideration the sibylline structure of very many sacred sentences, we can say that the Oriental extracts much from a few words: when, for example, the Koran recalls that "the world beyond is better for you than this lower world" or that "earthly life is but a play" or affirms: "In your wives and your children ye have an enemy" or "Say: Allah! then leave them to their empty play," or, finally, when it promises Paradise to "him who has feared the station of his Lord and refused desire to his soul"—when the Koran speaks thus, there emerges for the

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[1] Frithjof Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* (London: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976), p. 14.

[2] Louis Massignon, *La passion d'al-Ḥallāj*, p. 480.

> Muslim—we do not say "for every Muslim"—a whole ascetic and mystical doctrine, as penetrating and complete as no matter what other form of spirituality worthy of the name.[3]

The question of the origin of Sufism is also important—hence the insistence on it here—because its efficacy depends on its origin. Ultimate Reality is the aim and the end of Sufism, and that Reality, being Absolute, is by definition altogether independent of the relative, and not subject to it in any way. One mode of being subject to something is to be accessible to it or attainable by it. The relative has, in itself, no means whatsoever of reaching the Absolute. In other words it would be in vain for man simply to decide, of himself, to approach Ultimate Reality with a view to attainment. The Absolute must first as it were hold out a hand, or throw out a life-line. It must offer a power from itself, for the means of approach, in order to prevail, must have something of the Absolute about it. It must be no less than a loan from the Absolute, and that loan is precisely what is meant by Revelation, whatever form it may take. The question may therefore be asked: If Sufism is non-Islamic yet effective, that is, endowed with a reintegrating power of ebb back to the Absolute, to what flow proceeding from the Absolute is that ebb a reaction, or in other words, on what Revelation does it depend? The answer should moreover be immediately and clearly forthcoming, for it is not conceivable that Providence should have acted surreptitiously in this matter. But if, as the Sufis have always maintained, Sufism results directly from the Islamic Revelation, there is no problem. And in fact what the Sufis *do* and have always *done* in order to approach the Ultimate incontestably derives from that Revelation just as the oral teaching they receive from their Shaykhs consists very largely of Koranic verses and sayings of the Prophet and comments on both.

Islam is the most recently established spirituality in the world. Its adherents have had correspondingly less time to dwindle in sensitivity to the tremendous impact of its Revelation, or to cause it to take on a "list" through over-emphasis of certain aspects at the expense of others, or to produce heresies from it—in a word, to diminish it; and what applies to the religion as a whole necessarily applies to the mysticism which is its heart. Moreover Sufism is something of a bridge between East and West, being more akin in many ways to Judaism and Christianity than Hinduism is, for example, not to speak of what lies further East.

It goes without saying however that the modern seeker is beset by dangers from those many groups of self-styled "Sufis" and others who, whatever their claims, have in fact nothing authentic to offer. And even an authentic order may prove not to correspond to the deepest aspirations of the seeker in question. It is generally said of the Sufis themselves that there are two kinds of orders. One of these is relatively "static," being under the direction of a Shaykh who has not in himself any mastership beyond such general guidance as he can transmit from the traditions of the order. The other is under a Shaykh who is a *murshid* ("spiritual guide"), one

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[3] *Understanding Islam* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976), pp. 59-60.

who has himself reached the end of the path and is capable of guiding others to the end if they are sufficiently qualified.

The difference between these two orders is factual but never "official," and the members of a "static" order are seldom conscious of not being *sālikūn* ("travelers"). Nor must the word "static" be taken in an absolute sense. But there are likely to be some seekers, if only a few, who are qualified for a *murshid* and who, without the guidance of a veritable master, could never do justice to their latent possibilities. What is the definition of the *murshid*, the *pīr*, the *guru*, in the fullest sense these terms can have?

This question is the theme of a chapter entitled "Nature and Function of the Spiritual Master" in Schuon's *Logic and Transcendence.*[4] Its opening passages are couched in Hindu terms,[5] but the truths it expresses are universal and apply just as much to the Sufi *murshid* as to the *guru*; and many of its illustrations are drawn from Sufism.

This domain is in fact spiritually too central for there to be any real divergence between the different traditional forms of mysticism. All are known to insist on the three conditions mentioned here as indispensable,[6] so that there is good reason to fear that if any one of the three is not fulfilled, the whole endeavor "can only end up as a psychological exploit without any relation to the development of our higher states." These conditions correspond to initiation, doctrine, and method. The first "results from the principle that it is impossible to approach the Absolute, or the Self, without the blessing and the aid of Heaven." The "blessing" in question is the sacrament of initiation which brings the recipient to a new "birth," for "the first condition of spirituality is to be virtually 'reborn.'" As regards the master, this first condition is extrinsic: unlike the others, it does not depend on his sanctity, but on his authority as duly mandated representative of a divinely instituted mystical tradition.

The master must also personify "a providential doctrine," that is, a doctrine which "depends on a Revelation in the direct and plenary sense." The essence of the doctrine is "truth which distinguishes between the Real and the illusory." As an incarnation of this truth, the master is a living presence of discernment.

Finally he must be master of "the method which allows the initiated and consecrated contemplative to fix himself, at first mentally and later with the center of his being, on the Real."

It is clearly the first of these conditions which is the most frequently and easily fulfilled. The head of an authentic order which has become "static" is necessarily qualified to bestow initiation; but only a true *murshid* can be said to personify the doctrine of Ultimate Reality, and only he, as

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4 Harper & Row, New York, 1974.

5 This chapter was originally written for a volume presented to the Jagadguru Śrī Śaṅkarācārya Svāmigal of Kāñcī Kāmakōti Pītha in celebration of the 50th anniversary of his investiture.

6 Apart from "very exceptional cases" of which Schuon gives some illuminating examples.

regards method, can enter into the Spiritual Path of his disciple to the point of enabling him "to fix himself . . . on the Real."

As to the seeker, the first condition presents no problems, since he can normally reassure himself, before taking any step, as to whether it has been fulfilled. He can also ascertain, to take the case of a Sufi brotherhood, whether it faithfully represents the Islamic mystical tradition as regards both doctrine and method. But there the criteria may be said to end, if by criteria we mean what can be made the object of an investigation in the ordinary sense of the word. It goes without saying that there is no infallible way for a would-be disciple to identify a true guide through purely mental processes. There is however a much repeated Sufi dictum—and its equivalent is to be found elsewhere[7]—that every aspirant (*murīd*) will find a true *murshid* if he deserves one. It is also said, again not only in Sufism, that in reality and despite appearances it is not the *murīd* who chooses the way but the way which chooses the *murīd.* In other words, since the *murshid* personifies the way, he has, mysteriously and providentially, an active function towards the *murīd* even before the master-disciple relationship is established by initiation. This helps to explain the following anecdote told by the Moroccan Shaykh al-ʿArabī ad-Darqāwī (d. 1823), one of the very greatest masters of Sufism in recent centuries. At the moment in question he was a younger man but already a representative of his own *murshid*, Shaykh ʿAlī al-Jamal, to whom he complained of having to go to a place where he feared there were no spiritual people. His Shaykh cut him short with the terse remark: "Beget the man you need." And later he reiterated plurally the same command: "Beget them!"[8] We have already seen that the initial step on the spiritual path is to be "reborn"; and all these considerations suggest that the seeker's "deserving" of a master must include a consciousness of "inexistence" or "emphasis," an anticipation of the spiritual poverty (*faqr*) from which the *faqīr* takes his name. The open door is an image of this state, and the Shaykh ad-Darqāwī mentions in general that one of the most powerful means of obtaining a solution to a spiritual problem is to hold open and beware of closing "the door of necessity."[9] It may thus be inferred that the "deserving" in question is to be measured by the degree of the acuteness of the *murīd*'s sense of the necessity for a *murshid*, and that it depends on whether his soul is sufficiently imperative, as a "vacuum," to precipitate the advent of what he needs. Nor is such passivity incompatible with the more active attitude enjoined in Christ's "Seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you," since the most powerful way of "knocking" is prayer,[10] and supplication is a display of emptiness and an

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[7] See Whitall Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (London: Perennial Books, 1981), the section on "the Spiritual Master," pp. 288-295, for quotations from the mystics on this point and on others related to these paragraphs.

[8] *Letters of a Sufi Master* (London: Perennial Books, 1969), p. 19.

[9] Ibid., p. 11.

[10] This may be said to apply to every stage in the whole length of spiritual endeavor, and to prayer in all its degrees of inwardness—to petition, to litany, and to invocation.

avowal of neediness. In a word, not only the *murshid* but also the *murīd* has qualifications to fulfill.

Spiritual mastership means oneness with Ultimate Reality. In virtue of this the spiritual master may be said to be unsurpassed and unsurpassable. Yet although he personifies the Ultimate for his disciple, he is not its supreme manifestation in the universe. Schuon's chapter ends with the establishment of a hierarchy in which the spiritual master in the full and normal sense of the term occupies the lowest rank. Above him is the intermediary degree held by such persons as Christ's Apostles—Saint John, for example, and analogously by the Prophet's son-in-law ʿAlī; and finally there is the Divine Messenger himself, the founder of the religion.

It is also possible to consider a second intermediary degree:

> In comparing a Benedictine master—of the fifteenth century, for example—with Saint Benedict, and then comparing the latter with Saint John, we obtain a sufficiently clear picture of the principal degrees, not of spiritual mastership in itself, but of its manifestation in breadth, for it is important not to confuse an almost cosmic function with inward knowledge. . . . The less eminent does not necessarily represent a "lesser" as far as his inward reality is concerned. . . . It should not be too difficult to understand or to feel that, from the point of view of cosmic breadth, theurgic power, and the capacity to save, even a Shankara is not the equal of Krishna, and that from an analogous point of view no later master can be the equal of Shankara. . . . Nevertheless, every true master is altogether close, not only to the great instructors of "apostolic" rank but even to the founding *Avatāra*.

This brings us to another question. There is no difficulty in understanding that the end of the spiritual path is always one and the same, since it is no less than the One Absolute Infinite Eternal Truth. It is thus that the "inward reality" of the spiritual master, as regards the Ultimate, is unsurpassable. But how are we to understand the question of "cosmic breadth"?

Speaking with the voice of the Absolute, more than one great Sufi has declared himself to be without equal, and analogous claims are to be found in Hinduism and elsewhere. Some Western scholars have been thereby misled into supposing that the Sufis rank the Saints above the Prophets; and this opinion might in fact seem to be confirmed by the Koranic passage which tells of the strange and significant encounter between Moses and the mysterious al-Khiḍr,[11] who represent respectively exoterism and esoterism, or rather aspects of the one and the other. It is the Prophet here who implicitly recognizes the spiritual pre-eminence of the non-Prophet. But like the Sufi ejaculations, these verses from the *Sūrat al-Kahf* are something of a pitfall; for since the Prophet in question is also a Messenger, we are bound to conclude that the Koran is not

[11] 18:60-82.

portraying here the founder of Judaism in all his fullness, but has made as it were an abstract of the law-giving aspect of Moses to serve as a personification of exoterism; and as to the Sufi declarations, referred to above, these are made in virtue of their speakers' extinction in the Ultimate, and it is the incomparability of the Divine Self which they are affirming, not that of any particular Saint. Moreover, it was precisely one of the most explicitly self-affirming of the Saints who affirmed also, with regard to the founder of Islam: "If a single atom of the Prophet were to manifest itself to creation, naught that is beneath the Throne could endure it."[12] Similarly Ḥallāj, put to death for saying "I am the Truth," said of Muhammad that "he is the first in Union (with God)" and that "all sciences are as a drop from his ocean and all wisdoms as a sip from his river."[13] The Sufis certainly all agree with Ibn ʿArabī that although Sainthood is greater than Prophethood, the sainthood of a Prophet is greater than that of a non-Prophet. They are also unanimous in maintaining that among the Prophets it is the Divine Messengers (*rusūl*, pl. of *rasūl*) whose sainthood takes precedence. What constitutes this surpassing eminence—the highest greatness which can be said to "belong" to any differentiated being beneath the degree of the One Absolute Greatness of the Divinity? The inverted commas here are an admission that in reality all relative greatnesses are manifestations of the Absolute, but for which they would immediately vanish into nothing. But if the word "belong" had no point at all, then all Saints would be equal at every level, which is not the case. "And we have favored some of the Prophets above others, and unto David We gave the Psalms."[14]

On this phenomenon which, as we shall see, looms very large on the horizon of Sufism, Schuon throws further light in *Understanding Islam*. His concentrated chapter on the Prophet is more concerned with a particular example of cosmic greatness as compared with other examples than with what they all have in common, but he makes it convincingly clear that what Islam terms a *rasūl* ("Divine Messenger") is no less than what Hindus would consider to be a major *avatāra*; and he adds that from the Buddhist point of view neither Christ nor the Prophet could be assigned to any degree lower than that of a Buddha. The inverse of this is affirmed in his book on Buddhism; and it is here, in the chapter entitled "Mystery of the Bodhisattva," that he broaches the general question of "cosmic greatness" perhaps more directly than anywhere else:

> The Enlightenment which occurred in the lifetime of Śākyamuni beneath the Bodhi tree is none other than what in Western parlance would he called "Revelation," that is to say the reception of the Message or the assuming of the prophetic function. . . . Just as the soul descends suddenly on the embryo once it is sufficiently formed, so Enlightenment descends on the Bodhisattva who has

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[12] Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī, quoted by Kalābādhī, *Taʿarruf*, chapter XXIV. See *The Doctrine of the Sufis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1935), p. 54.

[13] *Tā-Sīn as-Sirāj*.

[14] Koran, 17:55.

> acquired, side by side with his Knowledge and his *Nirvāṇa*, those specific cosmic perfections which the shining forth of a Revealer requires.[15]

Later, in speaking of this same perfection of the Bodhisattva which qualifies him to become Buddha, he refers to its "unimaginable cosmic development." In this context we may remember that the Koran mentions Jesus and his mother as being "a sign for the worlds." The Prophet of Islam is likewise sent as a Messenger "to the worlds"; and the Koran affirms of him: "Verily of an immense magnitude is thy nature."[16]

Let us dwell for a moment on the significance of the Sufi litanies of blessings upon the Prophet as the human norm. It has already been made clear—and the existence of great Saints who are not Messengers proves it—that a perfection of such cosmic proportions as is required for a Revealer must not be considered as a necessary milestone upon the spiritual path, for the Ultimate can be reached from a less ample threshold. But though it would be both pointless and presumptuous to aspire to the extremity of existential amplitude as such, the imitation of the Messenger or of the *Avatāra* is always none the less a fundamental aspect of the way. Nor is it difficult to understand that it should be "alchemically" effective to imitate the inimitable and to set before oneself the vastest ideal of perfection, even while remaining conscious that its dimensions are unattainable. The Islamic Revelation has provided its mysticism with a remarkably lavish liturgical means of approaching this ideal. The perfection of the Messenger needs to be capacious above all as a receptacle of the glory of the blessings in which it is perpetually whelmed from every transcendent level. The Koran bids the believers join the celestial hierarchy in this act of glorification: "Verily God and His angels invoke blessings upon the Prophet. O ye who believe, invoke blessings upon him and greetings of peace."[17] And more than one canonical Tradition promises that such benedictions will be refracted ten-fold upon the invoker, who thus has a virtual share in the supreme aspect, that is, the receptive aspect, of the prophetic plenitude—virtual because, since the benedictions require a perfection for their object, they will have to be treasured as it were in suspense until the object is ready for them.

This fundamental practice of Sufism, rooted in a fundamental attitude, ranks only second to the invocation of the Divine Name. The practice and the attitude, which may be said to provide each other with mutual sustenance, have produced throughout the centuries a multitude of litanies in praise of the Messenger, some of them composed by Saints, and of great beauty.

The immense disparity between the human plenitude of the Messenger and other human perfections is merely a reduced image of the disparity it reflects from higher planes. The Koran says: "Behold how We have given precedence of favor unto some over others; and verily the

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[15] Frithjof Schuon, *In the Tracks of Buddhism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968), p. 139.

[16] 68:4.

[17] 33:56.

Beyond is greater in degrees, and greater in hierarchic precedences."[18] But if the plenitude in question can never be acquired subjectively—except in that the path's Ultimate End, the Supreme Self, may be said to include everything subjectively—it can none the less be acquired in a sense objectively: every religion promises, as one of the greatest blessings of Paradise, the presence there of these spiritual summits; and the sacred books give us to know that in the supra-formal freedom of the worlds of the Spirit, object and subject are not separated by the same barriers as they are in the rigid domain of forms.

The consideration of man's final ends brings us to our concluding question, and makes relevant a brief reference to the Koranic doctrine of the four Paradises. The *Sūrat ar-Raḥmān* (chapter 55) mentions these Paradises, not necessarily in an exclusive sense, but rather as affirming four main divisions in the hierarchy. According to a well-known Sufi commentary, often attributed to Ibn ʿArabī and published under his name, *Tafsīr ash-Shaykh al-Akbar*, though the author is almost certainly ʿAbd ar-Razzāq al-Qāshānī, these are, in ascending order, the Gardens of the Soul, of the Heart, of the Spirit, and of the Essence. The commentator differentiates between them[19] but he does not dwell on the starting point of this Koranic passage, which is the promise that every pious believer may expect for himself or herself not only one Paradise but two—that at least is the gist, though it is worded more elliptically. Let us consider this promise simply in relation to the two higher Paradises, for only here could the duality be in any sense a problem. The Garden of the Essence is no less than the Absolute and Infinite Oneness of God. From this point of view it might seem that all other Paradises cease to exist. How then can it be said that the supreme Saint, who is by definition in the highest Paradise, has "also" a second Paradise? This question can be parried with another: If it is possible for a supreme Saint to say, during his life on earth, in all sincerity of gnosis, "I am the Truth," why should it not be possible for such a statement to be made eventually, by the same Saint or by another, in the penultimate Paradise, the Garden of the Spirit?

This brings us once more to Schuon's *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, from which our second question is analogically borrowed. In its final chapter, "The Two Paradises," he reminds us "that there are in man two subjects—or two subjectivities—with no common measure and with opposite tendencies, even though there is also coincidence between them in a certain sense." The Divine and human natures of Jesus and their equivalent in Muhammad are ideal examples; and if it were not possible for the two subjectivities to co-exist, albeit at different levels of reality, in the next world, then the Prophets and the Messengers, once they had departed this life and been integrated into the Paradise of the Essence, would be altogether withdrawn from existence as differentiated persons, and the possibility of contact with them would be irretrievably lost. As Schuon says: "We should have to conclude that the *Avatāra* had totally

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[18] 17:21.

[19] See Abū Bakr Sirāj ad-Dīn, *The Book of Certainty* (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1992) which is partly based on this doctrine.

disappeared from the cosmos, and this has never been admitted in traditional doctrine. Christ 'is God' but this in no way prevents him from saying: 'Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise,' or from predicting his own return at the end of the cycle."[20]

Schuon's chapter may be taken as a commentary not only on the above-mentioned Koranic verses but also on an utterance of the Prophet of Islam which immediately preceded, and in a sense heralded, his final illness: "I have been offered the keys of the treasuries of this world and immortality therein followed by Paradise, and I have been given the choice between that and the meeting with my Lord and Paradise." The man who was with him begged him to choose the former, but the Prophet said: "I have chosen the meeting with my Lord and Paradise."

The "meeting with my Lord" is the Garden of the Essence. The Paradise which accompanies it can be no less than that of the Spirit, and this is directly confirmed by the last words which the Prophet was heard to speak and which express a foretaste of his beatitude therein: "With the supreme communion in Paradise, 'with those upon whom God hath lavished His favor, the Prophets and the Saints and the Martyrs and the Righteous—most excellent for communion are they!'[21]"

The Sufi conception of our final ends certainly allows for the duality in question. Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya's utterance of the adage "the neighbor first, then the house" in the sense of "God before Paradise" is an echo—not necessarily a conscious one—of the Prophet's choice, and it likewise affirms not only a precedence but also a co-existence; and it may well be asked if there has ever been a Sufi who did not hope to see the Prophets in Paradise, despite such formulations—more methodical than doctrinal—as have misled some Western scholars into supposing that what the Sufis aim at as regards their individualities, is "blank infinite negation." Christ's "Seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven, and all the rest shall be added unto you" expresses a universal principle which dominates every mysticism and which is often, as in Sufism, transposed to the highest possible level to mean, by "the Kingdom of Heaven," no less than the Garden of the Essence. If Sufi treatises tend to be silent about the second half, it is no doubt mainly because of the extreme urgency of the first half: but it is also because the mystic has absolutely no initiative with regard to "all the rest," as the very grammar of the wording makes clear. Silence is here a pious courtesy (*adab*) of trust (*tawakkul*) in Providence.

If it is true to say with Schuon that "the Absolute alone is absolutely real," which means that only the Garden of the Essence can be unreservedly termed Ultimate Reality, it is also true to say with him, of the three other gardens which together constitute Paradise in the ordinary sense of the word, "that Paradise, like the Prophet, is a theophany and that as such it cannot be spoken of as we speak of the created in respect of its non-divinity or separativity."

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[20] Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, p. 199.

[21] Koran, 4:69.

Let us also quote the parallel he offers us from Buddhism: “The idea of the ‘heavenly homeland’—the ‘Pure Land’—refers then to a certain mode of nirvanic or divine radiation and not to some ‘creation’ that is ‘other than God’; the paradisal region appears as the emanation of the ‘uncreated’ Center.”[22]

By way of conclusion, if a Sufi were asked “What is Ultimate Reality?”, let us suppose that his answer, “the Divine Essence,” calls forth the objection: “But I mean your Ultimate Reality.” His answer to this might well be: “The beginning and the end of my subjectivity are in the very Self of the Divine Essence.” And if it were still further objected: “But I mean you as distinct from anyone else,” he could insist: “You cannot escape from the Divine Essence as answer, for Ultimate Reality is One. That which you ask of is there, among the immutable essences (*al-aʿyān ath-thābita*[23]) which are the supreme archetypes of all differentiation, mysteriously united in the Oneness of the Self.” But a possible answer to the last question would be: “The Paradise of the Spirit.” That is the summit of what is normally understood by Paradise; and though this answer is not so rigorously metaphysical as the first, it may none the less be also acceptable to Ultimate Reality Itself, which has ordained that Paradise shall be “not other” than the Ultimate.

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[22] Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, pp. 183-184.

[23] See Titus Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* (Wellingborough: Thorsons, 1976), part 2, chapter 3.